

Practising Language Interaction via Social Networking Sites: the “expert student’s” perspective on personalized language learning

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Computer–Assisted Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Technological Advances

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Chapter 3

Practising Language Interaction via Social Networking Sites: The Expert Student's Perspective on Personalized Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the evaluation of language learning SNSs carried out by “expert students” who are training to become Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. While stressing the positive features available on these sites and novel ways in which they can enable personalised language learning, this study also focuses on some troublesome aspects that occur when learners engage with Web 2.0 tools. It discusses how initial motivation towards these tools can turn into frustration, mirroring the results of a previous autoethnographic study carried out on SNSs. It also illustrates how these global ubiquitous platforms pose a dilemma for language practitioners who work within institutional teaching settings. Teachers recognize the language learning potential of these tools, but are also worried by the ethical threat they can pose, which can normally be avoided, or at least moderated, within institutional proprietary and “less exciting” platforms.

INTRODUCTION

De Freitas and Conole (2010), quoted in Conole and Alevizou (2010, p. 9), propose that there are five technological trends that are likely to have a significant impact on higher education:

1. A shift towards ubiquitous and networked technologies.
2. The emergence of context and location aware devices.
3. The increasingly rich and diverse different forms of representations and stimulatory environments possible.
4. A trend towards more mobile and adaptive and devices.
5. A technological infrastructure which is global, distributed, and interoperable.

The above trends would appear to have already impacted on language learning with reference to how individual learners decide to engage in autonomous and personalized learning in a global way. This is illustrated by the websites of a language learning *Social Networking Site* (SNS) like *busuu*, which claims to be Europe's largest Web 2.0 language learning community, with over 5 million users at the time of writing (March 2012). It offers online study in 9 languages (from CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference – A1 to B2 levels) and has also made available a phone-app that, according to the *busuu* website, has already been downloaded more than five million times (Busuu, 2012).

Livemocha, another SNS for language learning which, like *busuu*, is now also available as a link within the generic, but ubiquitous, *Facebook*, which claims to be “The World's Largest Language Learning Community” and to have over twelve million members from over one hundred and ninety five countries at the time of writing (Livemocha, 2012). Even if, as pointed out by Brick (2011, p. 22) “there are no statistics available to indicate how many of these users are

active on the site on a regular basis,” the figures are substantial. They would appear to indicate that the innovative generic and every-day life social-collaborative modes of interaction that were successfully pioneered by *Facebook*, are now being disseminated to subject specific Internet areas, where every-day-life social interaction and educational co-construction of knowledge are becoming increasingly blurred. Brick (2011) argues that SNSs could be classified as “disruptive technologies,” in the way the expression is used by Godwin-Jones (2005) referring to Skype and Podcasting, in that they allow for new and different ways of doing familiar tasks.

Conole and Alevizou (2010) state that the learner experience with Web 2.0 tools has been the object of various studies and that there are not enough studies reporting on the teachers' perspective on them. The distinctive feature of this study is that it reports on the language learning experience with SNSs of “expert learners” in a Higher Education setting in the UK. Students were asked to engage with SNSs and to evaluate their experience from the point of view of future teachers, as they were studying a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) degree, some at undergraduate final year level and some at postgraduate level (MA in English Language Teaching). Individuals from both groups carried out autoethnographic studies, recording their experience about specific aspects of SNSs, while learning via the above mentioned ‘globally connected’ platforms in a personal way and recorded their autonomous language learning journeys.

This study will focus on language learning SNSs, *busuu* and *Livemocha* in particular.

It will also explore the darker side of the engagement with these tools, as students can meet ‘online friends,’ but also ‘online foes’ and it will reiterate that digital literacies must be developed within an ethical and academic framework in Higher Education.

It will start by discussing whether or not features of these ‘disruptive platforms’ should be

incorporated into mainstream language learning education. In some respects, these technologies can empower learners and enhance their digital literacy as well as their language proficiency, but in others, they appear to propose trite content and pedagogically unsound models. Teachers should not just be passively accepting new technologies into their pedagogy, but be prepared with the skills and information to be able to ‘choose, use and in some cases refuse technology for their students’ (Chapelle, 2006), and have a clear idea of both the strengths and the limitations of any tool available for both teaching and learning (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p. 2).

The “expert students” involved in the interventions discussed here therefore also worked at the metacognitive level of reflecting on their learning while engaging with it, in order to enable them to make informed personalized and autonomous language learning choices. Learners must be made aware of what is available. Warschauer and Ware, quoting Castells (2008, p. 228), propose that digital competences can enable all learners to be “interacting” rather than be passively “interacted.” The engagement of students with SNSs as part of their assessed tasks was therefore also meant to enhance the development of critical thinking in terms of “academic and professional multilingual digital literacies” (Orsini-Jones, 2010a, p. 199).

PERSONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

...certain capacities of an individual are not brought out except under the stimulus of associating with others (Dewey, 1916, p. 302; cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 226).

Without connection people cannot grow, yet without separation they cannot relate (Ackermann, 1996, p. 32).

The above quotes illustrate two of the main ‘ingredients’ widely thought to be fundamental in language learning in a Higher Education setting: social-collaboration (following from Vigotsky’s tenets on socio-cognitive growth, 1962) and autonomy. Little stresses how pivotal autonomous behaviour is to developmental learning and also adds that human beings have an innate predisposition towards autonomous behaviour (Little, 1996).

Between 2001-2008 staff in the Higher Education sector across Europe were discussing how to introduce institutional PLEs (Personal Learning Environments, see for example Jafari & Kaufman, 2006; Guth, 2009) and new e-portfolio software was developed to support the students’ autonomous and metacognitive e-learning journeys (e.g. *PebblePAD*). Students could personalize the environment and were free to keep it ‘hidden’ from their teachers (Orsini-Jones, 2010b).

With particular reference to language learning, the focus was on developing a pan-European new way of assessing language proficiency, with the adoption of the ipsative, self-assessment-based, model of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, whereby students state what they ‘can do’ in each of the four skills and record their progress autonomously (Little, 2006). The assumption was that learners would record the progress that they had made autonomously, but that the trigger for this would be teacher-directed activities aimed at fostering autonomy and independence (Little, 2007).

The advent of Web 2.0, defined “not so much as a shift in underlying technologies as to a transformation of informational, social and communicative practices” (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009, p. 815; O’Reilly, 2005; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) is forcing a novel way of exploring autonomous learning. Whereas before, with very few exceptions such as the *Multi-user domains, Object-Oriented (MOOs and MUDs)* of the 90s (e.g. Davies, Shield, & Weininger, 1998; Shield, 2003) the collaborative e-learning network was the institutional one, now it has become the globe.

At the time of writing (2012), language teachers, therefore, have to explore the new ways in which many people are learning languages outside the traditional setting of the language classroom and outside institutionally controlled VLEs or PLEs. Language professionals need to evaluate that experience and, if proven to be valid, to harness its potential for the educational environment. In particular, language teachers need to explore the affordances of the multifunctional and multilingual personalisation of the e-learning zones inhabited by their students in a connected ‘global village’ and try to evaluate the impact of this ‘global interaction’ on the language learning process.

A fundamental ingredient in autonomous learning has always proven to be motivation that is underpinned by the theories of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Dörnyei, 2001). Both of these qualities are thought to be strengthened and enhanced if individuals have some degree of autonomy in their lives and that extends to their educational experiences. Therefore, there is a strong relationship between autonomy and motivation. That is to say that motivated learners become autonomous learners. According to Benson (2001, 2004) autonomy is in reality *control*. However, control can be exercised in different fields—learners can control the *management* of their own learning. Alternatively, they may control *cognitive* aspects of their learning such as becoming conscious learners and reflecting on their learning. Alternatively, they may control *content*. Here it will be discussed in which areas of the SNSs under consideration the “expert students” felt that they could exert control in a personalized and autonomous way.

The autonomous e-learning domain of students in Higher Education is becoming wider and wider. Hartley (2007) claimed that Higher Education students in the UK inhabited different e-learning spaces, which could collide and were rather different from each other. He also proposed that many Higher Education institutions were trying to ‘fight for the playground’ area to engage students. The zones were defined as:

- The formal, public, controlled. The institutional world of control and individual assessment, the Virtual Learning Environment (*the museum*).
- The collaborative, informal, exploratory. The world of facilitation and inquiry, Google, wikis, *Facebook*, *Livemocha* (*the playground*).
- The personal, private and exclusive. The iPod, protected sections of iPhones, phone apps (*the refuge*).

Hartley was however writing before technological advances started to enable students to cross-reference each of these “e-learning spaces” with a variety of new tools and, in particular, with mobile devices. It could be argued that the boundaries between the three e-learning spaces identified by Hartley have now become much more blurred (Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2011). Each learner has a variety of options for both autonomous and socio-collaborative learning. Moreover, each learner can choose what persona, avatar, identity to adopt when interacting in environments that have taken the concept of role-playing to a much higher global level than the platforms available in the 1990s (Crystal, 2011). Each learner can now personalize all the social-collaborative spaces they inhabit outside educational settings in a way that is still rather difficult to emulate within institutional proprietary settings such as VLEs. In this way each learner is invested with a stronger sense of agency (Bruner, 1990), as the actions of the learner will determine their cognitive journey in a truly personalized way. Language teachers need therefore to be aware of what is ‘out there’ and what multilingual functionality is afforded by these new tools. Conole and Alevizou (2010, p. 21) argue that Web 2.0 tools give teachers “food for thought”:

Though it seems unlikely that Web 2.0 will fundamentally displace ‘teaching’ per se, it is clear that embracing Web 2.0 practices will mean that

more emphasis is placed on teaching processes being situated as active ‘colearning’ experiences. Adoption of a more scholarly and reflective approach to teaching practice is clearly a logical strategy to help achieve this shift.

So, while between 1995-2005 educators could still motivate their students with new e-tools students had not encountered before (as illustrated in Orsini-Jones, 2004 with the Virtual Learning Environment – VLE – WebCT), the situation is now reversed. It is educators who have to keep up with the tools the students already use in every-day life that are ‘morphing’ and blurring the boundaries between traditional educational settings (Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2011). The advent of Web 2.0 has brought about new language learning variables linked to learners’ personal preferences that can cater for the learner’s autonomous needs in a variety of ways. Novel personalized ways of approaching language learning are therefore emerging and they are happening more and more outside the traditional settings of a language-learning classroom. The private/social engagement of students with the SNSs illustrates that language learners have various opportunities to practise languages on a global arena (Brick 2011; Lloyd in press). At the same time, teachers must be aware of the limitations of these tools and go “Beyond the ‘wow’ factor” as recommended by Murray and Barnes (1998). Any new and ‘exciting’ technological tool should be used within a robust pedagogic framework (Orsini-Jones, 2010b), which is why it was helpful to involve “expert students” in the evaluation of the language learning SNSs illustrated below.

METHODOLOGY

The “expert students” involved in this study were asked to engage in introspective autoethnographic activities (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 77) while

interacting with the environments that are the object of this work.

Two main groups of “expert students” took part in the evaluation of SNSs:

- Students taking the undergraduate TEFL final year module *Multimedia in Language Teaching and Learning* (20 credits out of the 120 for the final year of their TEFL degree).
- Students studying module *Computer Assisted Language Learning: Past, Present, and Future* on the MA in ELT.

The undergraduate students were given an assessed task, which consisted in critically evaluating *busuu*. There were five groups and each of them was allocated a specific area to focus on: peer feedback, video and text conferencing, groups, learning materials. Students were also asked to compare *busuu* with one other SNS. Students were asked to use log-sheets, providing details regarding the length of time spent logged in the environment, the activities they had engaged in, and the social-collaborative exchanges they had availed themselves to. Students were also required to log their evaluation of the SNSs tools and features used in the dedicated shared Wiki area within the VLE Moodle.

Information on how to use Wikis was provided via the VLE (ICT4LT and Creative Commons 2008-2011). The Wiki chosen was “OU Wiki for Moodle,” a plug-in that was delivered from within the VLE. Twenty three students took part in total, the majority were British students (fourteen) and nine were Spanish Socrates exchange students, direct entrants to the final year of study. They were between the ages of 20 and 35; six were males and seventeen females. The study was carried out over a period of three months between October 2011 and January 2012.

The choice to opt for self-reflexive autoethnography, as opposed to a discourse analysis approach to the study of the exchanges the students had

online and/or of the pragmatics of the exchanges was also dictated by ethical reasons. Crystal points out that using data from the Internet presents the researcher with an ethical minefield: “Who owns the text-messages in my mobile phone archive: are they mine or the senders’? In an increasingly litigious world, linguists need to take care that their data collection procedures are robust with respect to the question of ownership.” (2011, p. 14) The study was carried out in compliance with the ethics requirements at Coventry University and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The students also produced Group Poster Presentations that summarised the results of their evaluation.

As for the Postgraduate students, the study was mainly based on an MA dissertation dealing with *Busuu*. It was the “expert student” herself who set the methodological framework and adopted a QUAL-Quan methodology (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 170), a mixed approach that also included triangulation of data. Questionnaires were created via *Surveyshare* (2011) and administered online. The result of the questionnaires were then triangulated with face-to-face focus group interviews. Eight out of the fourteen students on her course participated in her research: two males and six females, with an age range of 21-49 years old. It

was an international group that included two male participants, one Jordanian and one Somali, while the female participants were from: Bangladesh, Britain, China, and India. The Principal Investigator also decided to compile her own research journal and the project was carried out between May-August 2011.

RESULTS

Online Friends or Online Foes?

Interestingly, the “expert students’” reaction to the various Language Learning *SNSs* they explored reflected the same pattern illustrated in Clark and Gruba (2010) when they were reporting their autoethnographic experience of *Livemocha*, and carrying out a critique of the claim made by the *Livemocha* designers that the site is addictive and effective. Clark and Gruba well illustrated how they begged to disagree with the above-mentioned attributes and instead found that their engagement with *Livemocha* triggered, in this order: *motivation*, *frustration*, and then *demotivation*.

In Table 1 one of the groups of the undergraduate “expert students” provided a comparison of *busuu* and *Livemocha* that sums up their initial

Table 1. Comparison provided by one group of “expert students”

Busuu pros	Busuu cons	Livemocha pros	Livemocha cons	Overall Busuu	Overall Livemocha
Free registration	Extra charge for extras	Free registration	Extra charge to unlock some features	Offers 10 languages	Offers 35 languages
Social groups	Social groups not very active	Explore culture	No social groups	Mobile apps (offline)	No mobile apps yet
Attractive layout	Confusing navigation in places	Clearly structured	Unattractive layout (brown)	Quick, fast and short modules, more suitable for younger learners	Longer modules
Useful links	Unrelated advertising	Sharing of pictures	No external reference links	Premium only oral practice	Audio comments on submission
Feedback from native speakers	Lack of reliability	People from all over the world	Americanized (English and Spanish)	Busuu berries non redeemable	Livemocha points redeemable as ‘payment’ for courses

‘rough and ready’ evaluation of the language learning features of the two tools.

At the beginning, the students reported *motivation* towards the use of the SNSs, both because of their novelty and because of the new communicative opportunities the SNSs afforded them. Many initially liked the motivational feature of the *busuu* berries: “The webpage follows a system of reward, the ‘busuu berries’[...] these points can be given away to other users as proof of gratitude, so they enhance social interaction, with a strong sense of social network” (Wiki entry, “expert student” A, 27th October 2011). However language learners, like all learners, have different preferences and some participants found the concept of the berries childish and the idea of the garden that dies if not tended, reminiscent of the *Tamagotchi* false pets they had when they were little and slightly annoying for an adult learner.

They also enjoyed the opportunity to choose their own personal learning path within the environment and some reported on the ‘thrill’ of obtaining enough *Mocha points* on *Livemocha* to be entitled to be a teacher of that language and on the ‘fun’ of having access to so many new ‘language tandem learning partners.’ Amongst the positive feature listed were the following: opportunity to practise language skills with people from around the world; online dictionaries, useful phrases and grammar guides; instant online multilingual chats and groups, opportunity to download the sites as apps. The communicative features of the site were initially praised, particularly the ‘peer feedback’ feature in *busuu*: “It’s a great way to practise the language, especially in writing. It’s useful as a language learner to receive help and advice from native speakers” (Wiki entry 13th December 2011, “expert student” B). Referring back to Benson (2001 and 2004) and to the links between motivation and autonomous learning the initial reaction of the participants was a positive one as they felt they were ‘in control’ of their learning journey. It could also be argued that, as these users were ‘expert’ ones who would become teachers or that

already taught EFL or languages, the exposure to language learning SNSs was providing them with full exposure to the “linguistic, cultural, and technological diversity” (Wang, 2012) that language teachers need to be aware of these days to operate effectively in a globalized and networked CALL environment.

The most motivational aspect proved to be the social-collaborative ability to connect to groups with similar interests for the purpose of practising the language within the context of shared hobbies: a student was delighted to make contact with supporters of the Barcelona football team group: (Wiki from “expert student” C):

When I logged in Busuu on the 22nd October I had received an email from one of the creators of the Barcelona football team group asking me to join in the discussion. I was apprehensive [...] but I decided to have a look and see what I could put, and I commented on the group’s discussion about Lionel Messi. By joining in this conversation I gained some friends who regularly comment on my work now.

However, once students started making a methodical use of the communicative features and/or started to use the grammar exercises available in a systematic way, they became frustrated and noticed ‘strange’ things. For example, it is not always possible to tell what variety of the language is being used by the tandem learners: “The corrections given can sometimes contradict others. I especially noticed that there are a lot of South American Spanish speakers who use different words to those of Castilian Spanish speakers” (Wiki entry “expert student D” 6 January 2012). It became apparent that tandem learning can be misleading if there is the cover of anonymity which prevents participants from knowing exactly who they are dealing with and whether their online ‘friendly teacher’ is qualified to help or not. This report below illustrates this mismatch between student D’s expectation and the “online teacher’s”

feedback. The student below decided to engage in a translation consultation (and this, from the teacher point of view, can also raise the issue of collusion on a global scale):

Wiki Entry 02/01/2012 “Expert Student” D

*Submission 1: (8 hour wait for first correction).
[N.B. Student’s stress]*

*I correction provided: Tandem partner at 07.46
(01.46 in Mexico)*

My tandem partner changed random words and prepositions I had used throughout to make it correct, however there was an entire sentence in which he was unable to change in order to express the meaning I wanted. Therefore, I asked my tutor to correct the work. The sentence required a complete change of structure as shown below:

(Entry I had posted) También se exige que les enseñe acerca de la cultura británica y destacar las diferencias entre España y el Reino Unido.

(Correction from my tandem partner) También se exige que les enseñe enseñe acerca de la cultura británica y destacar las diferencias entre España y el Reino Unido.

(Correction from my lecturer) También se me exigía que les enseñara sobre la cultura británica y destacara las diferencias entre España y el Reino Unido.

As you can see, there is a huge difference between both of these corrections. In my work I had made the common error of translating an English phrase directly into Spanish, this phrase was ‘to make a difference’ which according to my lecturer does not exist in Spanish. However, nobody had decided to mention this or provide an alternative translation for this idiom. I would have been completely unaware of this error and would have continued

making the same mistake throughout my work if it weren’t for my lecturer.

A similar experience occurred to another learner: Student G.

I received two corrections from different users, who were both native speakers. They contested each other’s corrections and had different versions for me. I have no idea which is the correct one or what the differences between the two are [...]

Regarding accuracy, I was doing an exercise yesterday and the French was le rite and in the sound file, it was pronounced without the t on the end. I checked the IPA in my dictionary, and they should have been pronounced: /rit/ and sound files from Collins dictionary online pronounce it that way too. On busuu, it was pronounced as /ri/

However, whilst the students experienced some issues when translating into the target language, interacting via the SNS gave them opportunity ‘to attend to and reflect upon the form and content of the message...’ (Smith, 2003, p. 39), which may not have taken place in a face to face interaction. Following on from the feedback, if the student then wishes to find the ‘correct’ answer from another source, in this case a lecturer, uptake and further processing may be ‘enhanced if learners are forced to rely on their own resources in responding to feedback’ (Lyster, 1998; cited in Williams, 2001, p. 337).

Students also reported another frustrating feature (student D again): “members only seem to focus on grammatical and lexical errors as opposed to focusing on expression and text meaning.” It would appear from this diary entry that students were finding a lack of focus on context and semantics, which could be explained by the fact that participants on these language-learning SNSs are in the majority ‘non expert’ in terms of language learning pedagogical principles, even if they can assume the role of teacher in the environ-

ment. In fact, there is no guarantee that they are native speakers.

Computer ‘glitches’ added to the *frustration*: [Wiki from student C dated 25th November 2011] “Just logged on to *busuu* and everything has appeared in Turkish—this is not the first time this has happened and it is becoming a regular occurrence and frustration.”

The *frustration* experienced by many participants became *demotivation* because of two major problematic issues: cyberstalking and mismatch between claimed levels of materials and real level experienced. Cyberstalking was reported by many participants (both male and female, but with stronger incidence of harassment for females) in the online Wiki by the female *busuu* user below (student F):

Still do not understand the significance of busuu berries. People who send them to me are mostly male, giving me the sense that they are like sending heart shapes on bebo (back in the day!) and that it reinforces cyber stalking/people using the site for dating purposes instead of wanting to learn.

(...)

Still receiving requests from people (men) who don't speak Spanish.

In another entry from 10th November, student G wrote: “Something I find irritating is the dating adverts. They are too much ‘in-ye-face.’ Also, the photos are all of women, so is the target audience of *busuu* men?”

In one of the group posters, the members reported that cyberstalking had become particularly problematic for a member of their group. They wrote that not having a profile photo reduced cyberstalking, but also reduced the amount of ‘friends’ who would add you and therefore the chance to obtain feedback on oral and written production. They proposed that the social networking layout of the SNSs sites gives people the

wrong message and that this was aggravated by the presence on the sites of dating adverts. Even if many SNSs have the valuable option to block persistent inappropriate users, the students felt that it was difficult to have clearly set boundaries between educational and purely social motives on these websites and that this unfortunately was detrimental to the sites for educational purposes. They also had recommendations for use, one of which was: “Whilst these websites are a useful learning tool, it is important to stay vigilant in order to ensure that you are exchanging information with people with the same learning objectives, rather than using the site for social aspects.” It could be argued that this could be a hindrance to the full personalisation of the learner’s environment.

As for the ‘mismatch’ in the levels, these are the comments reported on LiveMocha from “expert student G,” Wiki entry 31st January 2012: “I started a course and was able to choose level 4, which was allegedly for advanced learners. However the lessons covered aspects of the language I learned in year 8/9 at school.” The materials also proved to be too devoid of contextualisation in both *busuu* and *Livemocha*, making it difficult for the “expert students” to provide meaningful corrections to the tandem partners who were asking for them:

[Wiki entry from student G dated 24th November 2011] “I received a request from another member to correct their work. I don't know if it's just me, but I often find it difficult to work out the context of the exercise the learner has done, because we cannot see the preliminary work. I sometimes don't know what to correct because it depends on the context.”

The students’ comments appear to also tie with the second study which was carried out on *busuu* by one of the MA students who graduated in 2011 (Pibworth, 2011). She wrote that the most significant and useful feature of *busuu* is the ability to connect and communicate with a large body of native speakers, both synchronously through

video, voice and text chat, and asynchronously, through discussion forums. The motivating aspect comes therefore from communicating in real time and receiving feedback on both spoken and written work. The frustrating aspect discussed in this study derived from the quality of the content: the learning materials on SNSs do not appear to have been designed with language learning theories in mind and in fact even apply language learning methods that have been widely criticised and discredited, e.g. ‘serial behaviourism’ and lack of contextualisation. These weaknesses are particularly noticeable in the areas relating to grammar learning on these SNSs. The grammar materials do not make good use of the interactive synchronous and asynchronous features available within SNSs (Pibworth, 2011, p. 52). The static presentation of grammar does not allow for learners to modify input or negotiate meaning through interaction with users, and the lack of interactivity is also evident in the practical activities, which follow the tradition of the ‘behaviouristic CALL’ (Warschauer & Kern, 2000) and are drill-based multiple choice questions and matching activities. So there is some kind of paradox going on within these social-collaborative environments, as their ‘hard-sell’ is social-collaboration, they have incorporated into their sites state-of-the-art collaborative tools and opportunities, but their materials revert to the most traditional and least pedagogically founded approaches to language teaching and learning practice. The latter, as well as dating adverts and cyberstalking, is demotivating for the learners.

Solutions and Recommendations

One of the more general aims of this study was to ascertain whether “expert students” who are likely to become TEFL teachers thought that there was a place for SNSs within their current and future language learning and teaching settings. As previously illustrated (Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2011), despite the problematic issues

discussed above, the majority of participants would recommend the use of SNSs to their learners for a variety of reasons: to add variety to learning and develop learner autonomy, because they can provide additional language practice and revision, and because learners can communicate with native speakers through the sites. All of the participants thought that SNSs would be suitable for personalized private or individual study, as learners can complete activities in their own time and at their own pace, but only a small minority felt they were also suitable for use in class with some guidance from the teacher.

This study made it more obvious to all concerned that because of the blurring boundaries between ‘generic’ SNSs like *Facebook* and the language specific ones like *Livemocha* and *busuu*, language practitioners in Higher Education must be aware of the ethical threat posed by these tools. As demonstrated above, cyberstalking is a demotivating aspect of these sites that can frustrate the serious language learners to the point of disengagement. Other worrying factors are the poor quality of many of the materials available on these sites and the inability of a learner in a tandem learning situation to apply any type of ‘quality control’ on the feedback received and/or on the credentials of the self-appointed ‘teacher,’ who might even be posing as a native speaker. The paradox on these sites is that the lack of inhibition caused by anonymity facilitates the setting up of ‘rich’ communicative exchanges (the ‘disinhibiting’ effect of CMC is discussed by many, e.g. Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006, p. 197; Lloyd, 2012; Crystal, 2011), while at the same time encouraging cyberstalking which can ‘kill off’ the will to engage in CMC.

For this reason it is argued here that it is still necessary to provide students with more ethically protected environments for CMC practice within institutional boundaries, while at the same time making them aware of what there is ‘out there.’ This is also because it is easier for teachers to foster the development of *academic multilingual digital literacies* (Orsini-Jones, 2011a) and to also

assess student progress in both language learning and digital literacies within a proprietary system (Orsini-Jones, 2011b) There are new e-portfolio tools that mirror the structure of SNSs that could be used for this purpose, such as *Mahara* (2012). It would appear that the “expert students” also agreed on this point.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Ideally, it would be useful to harness the CMC potential of SNSs for institutional purposes as they provide the opportunity to set up exchanges with native language speakers on a global scale. At Coventry University it is planned to have a more controlled CMC experiment in 2012-2013, utilizing the positive features of SNSs (mainly their social-collaborative ones) but with self-selected international learners willing to engage in language-learning focused CMC via Skype within the VLE Moodle. Mirroring the experiment carried out via Skype telephony by Polisca at the University of Manchester (Polisca, 2011) staff and students at Coventry University will collaborate with staff and students in a Mexican university to identify discourse features of Intercultural CMC and see how learners can personalize the content of the CMC exchange according to their needs.

CONCLUSION

The results reported here only relate to two small-scale studies that were mainly based upon qualitative data. For these reason the conclusions can only be tentative. However, as “expert students” were involved here, it is hoped that this study can add to the existing, and still somewhat limited amount of available literature on SNSs for Language Learning, which have all been available for less than 10 years at the time of writing (2012).

Language practitioners should further explore the various motivational features present in these

SNSs, but also beware of what frustrates serious “expert learners.” The ‘wow’ factor of the global access to native speakers must be put in the context of the possible dangers of cyberstalking and ‘native speaker impersonation’ or ‘teacher impersonation’ from people who might not have language learning as their main goal for accessing these SNSs.

As illustrated above, it is also apparent that some learners find some features annoying, while others like them (e.g. the berries in *busuu* and the Mocha points in *Livemocha*), so this study confirms that flexibility and variety is needed for effective language learning.

However, exploring further the affordances for personalized learning that these tools offer could provide ideas on how to create better institutional language learning platforms and approaches.

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